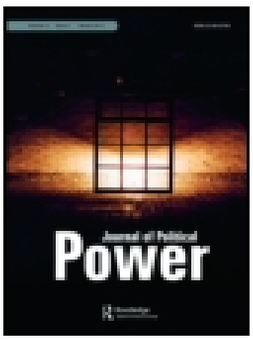

Journal of Political Power

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rpow21

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To cite this article: Joseph S. Nye (2021): Soft power: the evolution of a concept, Journal of Political Power

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/2158379X.2021.1879572

Published online: 10 Feb 2021.

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JOURNAL OF POLITICAL POWER
https://doi.org/10.1080/2158379X.2021.1879572

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Soft power: the evolution of a concept

Joseph S. Nye

Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University

ABSTRACT

In this paper, I respond to the editors request that I look back on the concept of soft power that I first published in 1990. I describe my approach to power; explain the origins of the soft power concept in relation to the academic debates in international relations, and respond to several criticisms of the concept. I then discuss coercion and voluntarism illustrated by the concept of sharp power, and conclude by describing the evolution of the concept in relation to policy interests of several countries.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 20 December 2019
Accepted 10 December 2020

KEYWORDS
soft power; hard power; sharp power; United States; China; Europe

In a thoughtful critique in this journal, Ivan Bakalov states that my work is 'the main reference point within the body of scholarly literature on soft power' (Bakalov 2019, p. 130). I have never claimed to have invented soft power. That would be absurd since the power behavior is as old as human history. I even start one of my works with a quotation from Lao Tsu in 630 BCE. But as Bakalov says, 'even if soft-power practice has its origins elsewhere . . . .scholars still acknowledge the fact that the Harvard professor was the one who coined the term "soft power" and still juxtapose their arguments against his' (Bakalov 2019, p. 130).

All concepts arise in a context, and contexts change. Stephanie Winkler has carefully traced the history of the concept of soft power over the past three decades. (Winkler 2020). As someone who has long been interested in the interaction between ideas and political behavior (Nye 1965), I hope it might be useful to describe how I see the evolution of the concept of soft power, even at the risk of seeming unduly self-referential. My view is certainly not definitive, but at least it is unique.

My definition of power

Like many basic ideas in social science, power is a contested concept. No one definition is accepted by all who use the word, and people's choice of definition reflects their interests and values (Dahl 1961, Bachrach and Baratz 1963, March 1966; Lukes 2005). Some define power as the ability to make or resist change. Others say it is the ability to get what we want (Boulding 1989, p. 15). This broad definition includes power over nature as well as over other people. Given my background and interests in international relations and

CONTACT Joseph S. Nye Joseph_Nye@hks.harvard.edu Kennedy School, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA. 02138

The author is grateful to Robert O. Keohane and Alexander Vuving for comments.

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foreign policy, I started with the simple dictionary definition that power is the capacity to do things, but more specifically in social situations, the ability to affect others to get the outcomes one wants. There are many factors that affect our ability to get what we want and they vary with the context of the relationship.

Humans live in a web of inherited social forces, some of which are visible and others of which are indirect that we call 'structural.' (Dowding 2008) We tend to identify and focus on some of these constraints and forces rather than others depending on our interests. For example, social power operates beneath the individual behavioral level by shaping underlying social structures, knowledge systems, and general environment (Katzenstein 2009). While such structural social forces are important, given my interest in foreign policy I wanted to understand what actors or agents can do within given situations. Civilizations and societies are not immutable, and effective leaders can try to shape larger social forces with varying degrees of success. As Max Weber said, we want to know the probability that an actor in a social relationship can carry out his own will (Weber 1947, p. 152).

Even when we focus primarily on particular agents or actors, we cannot say that an actor 'has power' without specifying power 'to do what' (Nagel 1975, p. 14). One must specify *who* is involved in the power relationship (the scope of power) as well as *what* topics are involved (the domain of power.) Power implies causation and is like the word 'cause.' When we speak of causation, we choose to pick out the relation between two items in a long and complex chain of events because we are interested in them more than the myriad other things that we might focus upon. We do not say in the abstract that 'an event causes' without specifying what it causes.

A psychopath may have the power to kill and destroy random strangers, but not the power to persuade them. Some say such use of force should not be called 'power' because there is no two-way relationship involved, but that depends on context and motive. If the actor's motive is pure sadism or terror, the use of force fits within my definition of power as affecting others to get what one wants. Many power relationships, however, depend very much on what the target thinks, and this is a crucial aspect of soft power. A dictator who wishes to punish a dissident may be misled in thinking he exercised power if the dissident really sought martyrdom to dramatize her cause. On the other hand, if the dictator simply wanted to destroy the dissident, her intentions did not matter to his power.

Practical politicians and ordinary people often find these questions of behavior and motivation too esoteric and unpredictable. Behavioral definitions assess power by outcomes which are determined after the action ('ex post') rather than before the action ('ex ante'). But policymakers want ex ante predictions to help guide their actions. Thus, they frequently define power simply in terms of the resources that can produce outcomes. By this definition of power as resources, a country is powerful if it has a relatively large population, territory, natural resources, economic strength, military force, and social stability. The virtue of this second definition is that it makes power appear to be concrete, measurable, and predictable – a guide to action. This is a common approach in international relations even though it sometimes misleads us.

Power in this sense is like holding the high cards in a card game. But this definition has major problems. People often think of power as synonymous with the resources that (may) produce outcomes, but they then encounter the paradox that those best endowed

with power do not always get the outcomes they want. The effectiveness of a power resource depends upon the context. For example, having superior battle tanks helped the US to prevail against Iraq in desert warfare; they were less successful in the context of swamps and jungles in Vietnam.

This is not to deny the importance of power resources. Power is conveyed through resources, whether tangible or intangible. People notice resources. If you show the highest cards in a poker game, others may fold their hands rather than challenge you. But power resources that win in one game may not help at all in another. Holding a strong poker hand does not win if the game is bridge. Even if the game is poker, if you play your high hand poorly, or fall victim to bluff and deception, you can still lose. Power conversion – getting from resources to behavioral outcomes – is a crucial intervening variable. Having the resources of power does not guarantee that you will always get the outcome you want.

Nonetheless, I found from my experience working in the State and Defense Departments that defining power in terms of resources was a shortcut that policymakers often use. In general, a country that is well endowed with power resources is more likely to affect a weaker country and have more options in choosing an optimal strategy than vice versa. Smaller countries may sometimes obtain preferred outcomes because they pick smaller fights or focus selectively on a few issues. As a first step in any game, one should start by figuring out who is holding the high cards and how many chips they have. Equally important, policymakers must have the contextual intelligence to understand what game they are playing. Which resources provide the best basis for power behavior in a particular context? Oil was not an impressive power resource before the industrial age nor was uranium significant before the nuclear age nor big data before the digital age.

In traditional realist views of international affairs, war was the ultimate game in which the cards of international politics were played. When all the cards were on the table, estimates of relative power were proven and disproven. But over the centuries, as technologies evolved, the sources of strength for war often changed. Moreover, on an increasing number of issues in the 21st century, war is not the ultimate arbiter. Military resources are not the solution to climate change or pandemics, but national security strategies and budgets allocate disproportionate attention to military resources rather than public health resources – though the COVID 19 virus killed more Americans than all our wars since 1945 – and the 1918 influenza pandemic killed more people than died in all four years of World War I.

I believed that the traditional 'elements of national power' (population, economy, military) approach was misleading and inferior to the behavioral or relational approach that became dominant among social science analysis outside of international relations in the latter half of the 20th century (Cline 1977, Tellis *et al.* 2000). This approach sees power resources are simply the tangible and intangible raw materials or vehicles that underlie power relationships, and whether a given set of resources produce preferred outcomes or not depends upon behavior in context. The vehicle is not the power relationship. Knowing the horsepower and mileage of a vehicle does not tell us whether it will get to the preferred destination.

In practice, discussions of power in foreign policy involve both definitions. In my experience in government, many of the terms in daily use such as 'military power' and 'economic power' power are hybrids that combine both resources and behaviors. So long

as that is the case, it is important to make clear whether we are speaking of behavioral or resource-based definitions of power and to be aware of the imperfect relation between them. For example, when people speak of the rising power of China or India, they tend to point to the large populations and increased economic or military resources of those countries. But whether the capacity that those resources imply can actually be converted into preferred outcomes will depend upon the contexts and the country's skill in converting resources into strategies that will produce preferred outcomes. In the end, since it is outcomes, not resources, that matter we must pay close attention to contexts and power conversion strategies.

The origin of the concept soft power

I developed the concept of soft power while trying to solve two puzzles, one disciplinary and the other about policy. In the 1980s, the international relations discipline became enthralled with the search for parsimonious structural models that cut away all extraneous detail. Kenneth Waltz' *Theory of International Politics* (Waltz 1979) was an elegant formulation called 'neo-realism' or structural realism that sacrificed much of the richness of the classical realist tradition to Occam's Razor. At about the same time, Robert O. Keohane and I published *Power and Interdependence: World Politics in Transition* which gave rise to what became called the 'neo-liberal' approach to international relations because we tried to capture the growing importance of transnational relations, economic interdependence, international regimes, and institutions (Keohane and Nye 1977).

Labels mislead, however, because Keohane and I never rejected realism. We argued that the explanatory value of the realist approach (which focused on states, security, and military power resources) varied with different contexts of world politics. We developed three ideal-typical models: an overall structure of power based heavily on traditional elements of power; an issue structural model that emphasized power resources particular to an issue area; and complex interdependence where states were not the only significant actors, security was not the primary issue, and the military was not the primary power resource. We argued that analysts should start with the overall structure of power and realism, but not stop there. However, this advice became lost in the fad of academics to use labels to sort concepts into pigeon holes.

Realism is not wrong as an approach to power in international relations; it is just insufficient. To avoid such labeling, in my most recent work, I describe myself as a 'liberal realist' and argue that analysts should start with realism but generally not stop there (Nye 2020). My complaint is not that realists start with traditional elements of power but they stop so soon after they start without realizing there is much more to be explained. This was the disciplinary situation I described in 'Neo-Realism vs. Neo-Liberalism,' in the late 1980s (Nye 1988, Guzzini 1993).

The policy issue that intrigued me at the same time was the question of how to respond to the widespread view that American power was in decline. The distinguished historian Paul Kennedy's best-selling *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* was the most prominent among many works that argued that the US was experiencing imperial overstretch and that its power was in decline. (Kennedy 1987) I debated Kennedy at a number of policy forums, and in 1989 decided to write *Bound to Lead:*

the Changing Nature of American Power (Nye 1990) explaining why I disagreed with him. In writing the book, I first assessed American power resources in traditional economic and military terms, but felt that something was still missing. The US was also able to get the outcomes it wanted because of attraction rather than just threats of coercion or payment. I called this 'soft power' and tried to understand its origins and dimensions. I distinguished it from hard power behavior based on coercion or payment.

While it is difficult to remember in light of the subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, there was a great fear and exaggeration of Soviet power in the 1980s. However, the stability of the bipolar structure of hard power resources that Waltz emphasized turned out to be illusory in part because of deficiencies in the centrally planned economic system, but also because of the loss of Soviet soft power. The iron curtain that divided Europe after World War II was based on the hard power of military force, but it was initially reinforced by popular admiration for the communist resistance to Hitler's fascism. This Soviet soft power was undercut by their use of hard power to suppress revolts in Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968. The Berlin Wall ultimately collapsed in 1989 not under a barrage of artillery but from hammers and bulldozers wielded by people whose minds had been affected by Western soft power. Some analysts said the Americans also had a European empire, but Geir Lunstadt described it as 'empire by invitation.' (Lundstadt 1998). That difference in soft power contributed to the peaceful end of the Cold War. Ironically, the Soviet empire collapsed only a few years after the various proclamations about American decline that led to *Bound to Lead* and the coining of the term 'soft power.'

These disciplinary and policy puzzles helped to generate the concept, but the context also helped to shape it. Unlike pure mathematics, ideas in social science are affected by the context of contemporary political debates. As I tried to formulate my idea, I read through the recent literature on political power and realized how much it was influenced by debates about power elites and community power in domestic democratic politics. When they used a behavioral rather than a resource definition, international relations scholars tended to import Dahl's command approach that power meant forcing an actor to do what they otherwise would not do rather than adapt it to fit an international context (Dahl 1961, Bachrach and Baratz 1963, March 1966). As Bakalov says, 'on a conceptual level, Nye aimed to transcend "classical balance of power" understandings of world politics . . . He sought to affirm a broader concept of power that is not limited to situations of A controlling/dominating B, as realists would arguably have it, but that includes instances of A achieving desired outcomes in concert with B. Nye captures this aspect of power with . . . the opposition between "power over other countries" and 'power over outcomes.' The approach was 'actor-centric, relational, and strategic' as befitted an interest in foreign policy (Bakalov 2019, p. 134).

As Bakalov also noted, my approach also led to some things about the concept that I later had to clarify in response to criticism. One was the ambiguity in the description of the role of resources in distinguishing between hard and soft power. I originally wrote that the ability to get others to want what you want 'tends to be associated with intangible power resources such as culture, ideology and institutions.' I was using a behavioral definition of power, but trying to reconcile it with the common policy practice of using

a resource definition. David Baldwin accurately pointed out that tangibility was not a defining criterion and I accepted that (Baldwin 2002).

Others, however, argued that my language led to the impression that 'soft power now means everything,' (Gelb 2009, Layne 2010), and some writers used the concept to mean anything other than military power. This was not correct, and I tried to clarify it in *The Future of Power* (Nye 2011) by reaffirming the primacy of the behavioral definition. As I said, 'many types of *resource*s can contribute to soft power, but that does not mean that soft power is any type of *behavior*. The use of force, payment, and some agenda-setting based on them I call hard power. Agenda-setting that is regarded as legitimate by the target, positive attraction, and persuasion are the parts of the spectrum of behaviors I include in soft power. Hard power is push; soft power is pull.' Or to extend a common metaphor, hard power is like brandishing carrots or sticks; soft power is more like a magnet. Some resources that are commonly associated with hard power in most contexts can also produce soft power in another context. For example, when US naval ships provided tsunami relief to Indonesia in 2004, polls showed a rise of attraction to the US in that country. Some resources can produce hard and soft power simultaneously: witness the Marshall Plan in 1948 or China's Belt and Road Initiative aid program today (Taverner 2010).

Over the years, a number of critics have argued that my policy interest produced a concept that assumed liberal or American values. This criticism was understandable because I was interested in relative power at the end of the Cold War and many Western values were more attractive than Soviet values at that time. But I regarded the attractiveness of liberal values as an empirical question to be determined in different times and situations, not something that is built into the concept of soft power. Attraction rests in the eye of beholder and can be generated by impressions of kindness, competence, or charisma (Nye 2011, p92, Vuving 2009). To a greater degree than with hard power, soft power depends on the minds of the target audiences. A given cultural resource such as a Hollywood film may produce attraction in Brazil at the same time it produces repulsion in Saudi Arabia. I tried to make this clear in *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* which is very critical of American policy in the Middle East in the aftermath of the invasion of Iraq. (Nye 2004) The power of attraction is not inherently liberal or Western. For example, among Sunni Muslims, Saudi Arabia has a great deal of soft power (Gallarotti and Filali 2012). It can be associated with organizations like the BRICS which include both liberal and authoritarian states. (Gallarotti 2016). And anti-liberal actors can produce soft power in eyes of some crucial audiences even as they produce repulsion in others. Osama bin Laden did not coerce or pay the pilots who destroyed the World Trade Center towers; he attracted them with a particular extreme form of their religion. I tried to clarify this in my book *The Powers to Lead* (Nye, 2008) which applied the concept of soft power to leaders at all levels of behavior, not just to international relations and the behavior of states.

Another aspect of the concept that needed later clarification was its relationship to Steven Lukes' classification of three faces of power (Lukes 2005). Unfortunately, I did not discover his important and insightful work until after I had published mine. As Lukes points out, my concept of soft power is similar but not identical with his third face of power. My concept was developed in the context of international relations and includes the voluntaristic aspects of agenda setting as well as preference setting by attraction and

persuasion. I was more concerned with the actions of agents and less concerned about the problematic concept of 'false consciousness.' Lukes calls soft power 'a cousin' of his concept of the third face of power. I greatly admire his work and discussed the relation to the three faces of power in my 2011 work.

Voluntarism and coercion

Another interesting criticism was that soft power is not so soft and can include elements of coercion (Mattern 2005). Agents can twist the minds as well as the arms of targets and that blurs the distinction between hard and soft power. I agree with this, but I do not think it undercuts my argument. I described the distinction between hard and soft power as a matter of degree along a spectrum of behaviors that range from the hard end of command to the soft end of co-option. Red and blue show clear differences at the ends of a color spectrum, but it is often difficult to assign various shades of purple in the middle into the red or blue category. I argued that this was true of some power behaviors. Agenda setting is an example. If an agent deceives the targets and deprives them of choice, the structural manipulation fits the category of hard power; if the targets regard the agent's agenda setting as welcome and legitimate, the behavior fits better in the category of soft power.

Baldwin points out that 'a spectrum is a way of illustrating different degrees of a single dimension of something' whereas power has many dimensions any one of which can be represented by a continuum (Baldwin 2016, p. 166). This is correct and one could build other dimensions into the concept (though at a cost in terms of complexity). For example, in a private communication Alexander Vuving suggested to me an alternative formulation of the concept based on two dimensions: symmetrical and asymmetrical voluntarism by the target on one axis, and direct or indirect manipulation by the agent on the other.

This would yield four power categories: coercive, structural, transactional, and attractive. Hard power behavior would include coercion, manipulation of structure, and payment. Soft power behavior would include positive attraction and persuasion. There are benefits but also problems with treating structural power itself as a category of behavior rather than as part of the context. There is always a context that limits choice and information. Structure is consistent with coercion, inducement, attraction, and manipulation (Strange 1988, Digeser 1992, Guzzini 1993). In my approach, structure is very important as a power resource, but not itself a form of behavior. Manipulation, or what Vuving subsequently called structural arrangement, is the power behavior, and manipulation of structure can include the deliberate use of misleading or false information by an agent to affect the target's behavior.

The issue of voluntarism and coercion in the manipulation of ideas has been complicated by the introduction of the concept of 'sharp power' (Walker and Ludwig 2017) in the aftermath of authoritarian states' insertion of false information into the political processes of democratic countries. Walker and Ludwig argue that the expansion and refinement of Chinese and Russian sharp power should prompt policymakers in the United States and other democracies to rethink the tools they use to respond. They contrast sharp power, which 'pierces, penetrates, or perforates the political and information environments in the targeted countries,' with soft power which harnesses the allure of culture and values to enhance a country's strength. The fact that an agent uses ideas as a power resource does not make the action soft power behavior unless it rests on positive

attraction. Strategic communication, propaganda, and information warfare are not new, and sharp power is not soft power though the two terms are sometimes confused with each other since they both focus on the targets' minds. Propaganda is a case in point. If it is recognized as such by the target, propaganda lacks credibility and thus fails to attract. But if propaganda attracts, it can produce soft power. The dividing line between soft and sharp power on the spectrum is sometimes like the distinction between red and blue on the color spectrum.

My spectrum of power behaviors focuses on the degree of voluntarism accorded to the target. In hard power behavior, coercion removes a target's choices by negative sanctions; transactional inducement alters the target's choice by manipulating the prospect of positive sanctions. In soft power behavior, attraction can be direct with no deliberate action by the agent ('a city on the hill effect') or indirect and mediated by communication. Persuasion (or advertising) is mediated attraction where the agent intentionally frames the communication. Modest framing that enhances attraction in a way that preserves meaningful voluntary choice by the target remains soft power. Extreme framing (such as lies and deception) that severely distort reality remove the target's meaningful choice and shade into the hard power behavior of coercion. Soft power depends on enough voluntary choice to allow an analytic observer to meaningfully describe the target as being positively attracted. Soft power does not depend upon being true, but on the agent's intentions of presenting true or false information.

The intentions of an agent can be benign or hostile, and soft power can be used as a weapon against third parties or by setting one part of a target against another. The softness of the power behavior depends upon the degree of voluntary attraction by the targeted actors. The legendary Pied Piper attracted the children as a weapon to punish the burghers of Hamlin. In the 2016 American election, some of the information Russian agents inserted via Facebook postings was true (rather than fake) and attracted some Americans in opposition to others. In those instances, soft power was used as a weapon, but it still remains different from sharp power when it rests on voluntary attraction. In some contexts, it can have the same instrumental effects as sharp power, but the basic definitions are orthogonal. Of course, distinguishing red from blue on a spectrum can always lead to hard cases. If Don Juan seduces a woman who is attracted to him, it is soft power; but if he uses force or lies in proposing marriage, he reduces the situation of voluntarism and his behavior falls into the category of hard power. If she gives him money because of attraction, it is an exercise of soft power but if the gift was conditioned by his false promise, it is an example of hard power. Or in a case from the Internet age, if a teenage girl attracts an unstable young man through a series of messages, it is soft power, but if she tires of him and uses the her attraction to persuade him to commit suicide, it becomes an exercise of hard power, and a court would find her culpable.

The issue becomes more than hypothetical as democracies face the policy questions of how to respond to authoritarian intrusions in the Internet Age. One observer argues that 'Nowadays, the distinction between hard and soft is becoming less relevant because soft power is itself being weaponized' (Laidi 2019). But as we have seen, sharp power and soft power work in very different ways. In particular cases, however, the distinction between them can be difficult to discern – and that is part of what makes responding to sharp power a difficult policy issue. All persuasion involves choices about how to frame

information. Only when that framing shades into deception, which limits the subject's voluntary choices, does it cross the line into coercion.

It is this quality – openness and limits on deliberate deception – that distinguishes soft from sharp power. As democracies respond to sharp power, they have to be careful not to overreact in a way that undercuts their own soft power by following the advice of those who advocate competing with sharp power on the authoritarian model. Much of democratic soft power comes from civil societies – in the American case from Hollywood, universities, and foundations more than official public diplomacy efforts – and closing down access or ending openness would damage this crucial asset. Authoritarian countries such as China and Russia have trouble generating their own soft power precisely because of their unwillingness to free the vast talents of their civil societies. If openness is a key source of democracies' ability to attract and persuade, by using the sharp power tools of their adversaries, ironically, democracies could squander their soft power advantage. This is a new and different set of policy issues than those that puzzled me as I formulated the concept in 1989.

The political adoption of the concept

When I developed the idea of soft power, I thought of it as an academic concept to fill a deficiency in the way international relations scholars thought about power, but to my surprise, it gradually took on much broader political resonance as a concept that was useful to leaders. As mentioned earlier, the underlying power behavior is not new and similar concepts can be traced back to ancient China, among other civilizations. Although I developed the term soft power in the context of my study of American power, it is not restricted to international behavior or to the United States. It became particularly popular in Japan with its pacifist constitution. As the European Union developed, more European leaders began to refer to its soft power, perhaps to balance a deficiency in hard military resources. But the size of the European market (equal to the US and larger than China) plus Europe's attention to creating regulatory standards for the single market gave the EU a degree of hard economic power that *The Economist* has called 'the Brussels effect' (The Economist, 2020, p. 23). Added to that hard economic power was a degree of soft power attraction from the success of the EU, its model of multilateral cooperation, and its aid programs. In any event, the term soft power became politically useful to European political elites.

Initially, the term was not used much by American political leaders. American political culture and rhetoric privileges toughness rather than softness. Ironically, one US group that began using the concept was the military. For example, in 2002, when a general asked the Secretary of Defense what he thought of soft power, the civilian replied that he did not understand what soft power meant (Nye 2004). This attitude was evident among political leaders well before the security drama that followed the terrorist attacks on 9/11, but in that climate of fear, it was difficult to speak about soft power, even though attracting moderates away from appeals by radicals became a key component of the army's counter-terrorism strategy, and in 2007, the Navy pronounced soft power an important part of its strategy (Chief of Naval Operations 2007).

In that climate, and with the invasion of Iraq proving disastrous, I felt I should use my role as a public intellectual to spell out the meaning of soft power in greater detail for the policy

community. Some policy journals were incorrectly describing soft power as 'non-traditional forces such as cultural and commercial goods' and dismissing it on the grounds that 'its, well, soft' (Ferguson 2003). And a Congresswoman told me privately that she agreed with the concept, but that it was impossible to use it to address a political audience who wanted to hear tough talk. In 2004, I went into more detail conceptually in *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*. I also explained that soft power was only one component of power in international relations, and rarely sufficient by itself. The ability to combine hard and soft power into successful strategies where they reinforce rather than undercut each other could be considered 'smart power' (a term later used by Hillary Clinton as Secretary of State.) I developed these concepts further in *The Future of Power*, including in the cyber domain (Nye 2011). Although I explored various dimensions of the concept more fully in this work, the central definition (the ability to affect others and obtain preferred outcomes by attraction and persuasion rather than coercion or payment) remained constant.

In 2007, as the situation in Iraq continued to deteriorate, I co-chaired a 'Smart Power Commission' for the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington as a way to promote the concept to the policy community. With former senators and supreme court justices participating, we hoped to use soft and smart power for the political purpose of influencing American foreign policy. Subsequently, in 2007 Secretary of Defense Robert Gates publicly called for the US to invest more in soft power. Some years later, another Defense Secretary James Mattis told Congress that if they did not invest in the soft power of the State Department and AID, they would have to buy him more bullets (Nye 2020, p. 16). It was a long way from the modest ambitions for the analytic concept scribbled out on my kitchen table 17 years earlier. The term 'smart power' (the successful combination of hard and soft power resources into effective strategy) was deliberately prescriptive rather than just analytical.

I was more surprised by the fate of the concept in China. As China dramatically developed its hard power resources, leaders realized that it would be more acceptable if it were accompanied by soft power. This is a smart strategy because as China's hard military and economic power grew, it could frighten its neighbors into balancing coalitions. If it could accompany its rise with an increase in its soft power, China could weaken the incentives for these coalitions. In 2007, Chinese President Hu Jintao told the 17th Congress of the Chinese Communist Party that they needed to invest more in soft power, and this continued under President Xi Jinping. Once the top leaders had spoken and the word was out, billions of dollars were invested to promote soft power, and thousands of articles were published on the subject. China has had mixed success with its soft power strategy. Its impressive record of economic growth that has raised hundreds of millions of people out of poverty and its traditional culture have been important sources of attraction, but polls show it lags behind the United States in overall attractiveness in most parts of the world, including Asia (Shambaugh 2020).

Top-level endorsement in China affected me directly. Hardly a week went by in the year after Hu Jintao's use of the concept without an email asking me to write an article or participate in some soft power seminar or conference. Chinese officials contacted me for private conversations about how to increase China's soft power. A high ranking official invited me to a one on one dinner in Beijing to discuss the question. My advice was always the same. China should realize that most of a country's soft power comes from its civil society rather than from its government. Propaganda is not credible

and thus often does not attract. China needs to give more leeway to the talents of its civil society, even though this is difficult to reconcile with tight party control. Chinese soft power is also held back by its territorial disputes with its neighbors. Creating a Confucius Institute to teach Chinese culture will not generate positive attraction if Chinese naval vessels are chasing fishing boats out of disputed waters in the South China Sea.

On one occasion, I was invited to address 1500 students at the School of Marxism at Peking University. I responded to the usual question of how China could increase its soft power by mentioning the harassment of the great Chinese artist Ai Wei Wei as an example of too tight control over civil society. There was a slight titter in the crowd, but at the end of my lecture, the dean of the School of Marxism took the stage and said 'we are flattered to have Professor Nye here, but you students must realize that his use of the concept is overly political and we prefer to restrict it to cultural issues.'

With time, I have come to realize that concepts such as soft power are like children. As an academic or a public intellectual, you can love and discipline them when they are young, but as they grow they wander off and make new company, both good and bad. There is not much you can do about it, even if you were present at the creation. Bakalov argues that three aspects of my soft power concept have remained stable over this evolution: it functions through directly or indirectly transforming the attitudes of target audiences in foreign countries; it has a longer operational time horizon compared to hard power and is more suited to the attainment of general rather than specific goals; it does not lie exclusively within the control of a country's government, but is shared with civil society (Bakalov 2019, p. 134). Or as Baldwin summarized, 'Nye's discussion of soft power stimulated and clarified the thoughts of policymakers and scholars alike – even those who misunderstood or disagree with his views' (Baldwin 2016, p. 171). Perhaps that is all one can hope for.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Joseph S. Nye Jr. is University Distinguished Service Professor Emeritus and former Dean of Harvard's Kennedy School of Government. He received his bachelor's degree summa cum laude from Princeton University, won a Rhodes Scholarship to Oxford, and earned a Ph.D. in political science from Harvard. He has served as Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs, Chair of the National Intelligence Council, and a Deputy Under Secretary of State, and won distinguished service awards from all three agencies. His books include *The Future of Power, The Power Game: A Washington Novel, and Do Morals Matter?* He is a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, the British Academy, and the American Academy of Diplomacy. In a recent survey of international relations scholars, he was ranked as the most influential scholar on American foreign policy, and in 2011, *Foreign Policy* named him one of the top 100 Global Thinkers. In 2014, Japan awarded him the Order of the Rising Sun.

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